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Navy May Develop New Support Ships, Pursue Sealift Experimentation

The Navy is considering developing new "expeditionary support ships" that could provide the Marine Corps more amphibious lift, serve as staging bases for special forces and perform command and control for mine countermeasures and other missions, according to Maj. Gen. William Whitlow, head of the chief of naval operations' expeditionary requirements division.

Such ships could supplement the Marine Corps amphibious lift capabilities, boosting the number of assault assets traveling with forward deployed naval forces, Whitlow told Inside the Navy in a brief interview last week. Proposals developed under Whitlow's purview suggest buying a few support ships, designed as variants of the yet-to-be-developed MPF(F) ships that will replace the Marine Corps' prepositioning force.

According to Whitlow, the support ships could be optimized for different missions as needed, including use as an afloat forward staging base – the kind of special operations mission the aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk (CV-63) assumed for Operation Enduring Freedom – and mine countermeasures command and control missions, carrying helicopters once based on the Inchon (MCS-12), which is scheduled to be decommissioned. The ships could carry an enhanced medical field capability, he said. Fixed-wing aviation is not included in the notion or concept for the support ships, Whitlow said. But he argued the

ships could provide increased flexibility to the warfighting commanders-in-chief.

"It makes so much sense it's almost scary," Whitlow said of the support ship idea. He said Navy officials are in the process of working the idea within the Navy staff, noting it has been well received. At the moment, there is no expeditionary support ship program and it remains to be seen if money will be made available for that purpose.

In a related matter, Whitlow said he supports efforts to secure a large sealift vessel for experimentation that would benefit the MPF(F) program and allow further exploration of the expeditionary support ship idea. The Marine Corps' maritime prepositioning ships are forward-deployed floating warehouses of military equipment. The Marines want the MPF(F) ships to add new capabilities such as the ability to selectively onload and offload equipment at sea.

Lt. Gen Edward Hanlon, head of Marine Corps Concept Development Command, has called for making an MPF(F) prototype from a Large Medium Speed Roll-on/Roll-off (LMSR) vessel or another kind of ship. In an April interview with ITN, Hanlon discussed how such a prototype could be used for experimentation (ITN, April 29, p1).

"I'm not going to say this will definitely happen but let me give an example of something that could happen," Hanlon said in the April interview. "We have these fast sealift ships, the LMSRs that we purchased – 20 or so – over the last decade. It might very well be taking an LMSR and taking a ship of that class and experimenting with it by saying, 'OK, if we had a ship of this class and it was going to form the nucleus of our MPF(F), how would we redesign her internally to be able to have the selective offload capability and selective onload capability?'"

LMSRs are just short of 1,000 feet in length, nearly as long as aircraft carriers. Hanlon said the ships may have to be made larger, but stressed "designing the thing to give you the right capability internally" is what is most important.

It remains to be seen whether money will be budgeted to pay for an MPF(F) prototype of some sort. Naval Sea Systems Command has explored a range of possibilities for creating an experimental vessel. One NAVSEA estimate says making a prototype from an LMSR could take 22 months and cost $216 million, while less capable prototypes could be developed for somewhat less money and in less time. Expeditionary warfare officials are most interested in experimenting with interfaces for air-cushioned landing craft (LCACs) utility landing craft (LCUs).

Unlike MPF ships – which are forward deployed in three distinct squadrons – expeditionary warfare officials envision the support ships sailing with the amphibious ready groups of tomorrow. The support ships would carry LCACs and LCUs, filling what the Marine Corps sees as a gap in its amphibious lift capabilities created by the inability to afford buying more amphibious ships. Last week, a spokeswoman for Hanlon said he had heard about the idea of creating an MPF(F) variant but was not familiar with the details.

Expeditionary warfare officials developed the support ship idea to respond to a question posed last year by the Office of the Secretary of Defense about how to increase amphibious lift to meet the established combat-assault lift requirement for the Navy and Marine Corps of 3.0 Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) assault echelons. The question was posed in discussions about efforts to replace the Marine Corps' aging Tarawa-class LHA amphibious assault ships. The support ships are not intended to replace the LHAs; for that, the Navy Department is looking to a modified Wasp-class LHD amphibious ship design. But Whitlow is advocating the support ship concept as a way to finally meet the 3.0 MEB

requirement that has for years been unaffordable.

The Navy has accepted the inevitability of a "resource-constrained" goal of 2.5 MEB lift – and the associated risk – but that should change, Whitlow argued recently on Capitol Hill. In April, Whitlow told the Senate Armed Services seapower subcommittee in prepared testimony the Navy Department has been unable to maintain the 2.5 MEB capability in the active force. In terms of active capability, today's expeditionary forces "are only equipped at 2.1 MEB lift equivalent with the corresponding risk and dangers inherent in such a reduced posture," he testified. "According to the current ship construction plan, the 2.5 MEB lift capability will not be achieved until delivery of the twelfth LPD-17 now estimated for the 2015 timeframe," Whitlow testified.

The LPD-17 amphibious ship program, which has been troubled by delays and cost increases, is intended to replace four classes of older ships (LKA-113, LST-1179, LSD-36 and LPD-4).

In July 2001, Marine Corps Assistant Commandant Gen. Michael Williams testified before Congress that the fiscally constrained 2.5 MEB requirement was being sustained with a combination of active and Reserve Navy ships and inactive ships maintained in the Amphibious Lift Enhancement Plan. Whitlow's testimony omits any reference to ALEP, which Hanlon described in April testimony to Congress as five LKAs and four LSTs in the Ready Reserve Fleet. Once all 12 LPD-17s are completed, the reliance on ALEP would be eliminated, Hanlon testified.

Marine Corps officials have criticized the utility of ALEP before. In 1999, Marine Corps Maj. Gen. Emil Bedard – who has since been promoted with a third star – told the seapower subcommittee that ALEP is a poor solution to sealift requirements because it would take 180 days to prepare mothballed ships to get underway. This delay precludes officials from including ALEP ships in major theater war plans and in the unlikely event the ships did become available their characteristics would be inconsistent with the Marine Corps' "Operational Maneuver From the Sea" concept, Bedard said in prepared testimony.

Last week, Whitlow told ITN the expeditionary support ship proposal would allow the department to retire ALEP because it would cover the .5 amphibious lift delta that ALEP covers. If the Navy Department buys the support ships and fields all 12 LPD-17s, the Marine Corps would exceed the 2.5 MEB lift level and meet the 3.0 MEB lift requirement, he said.

– Christopher J. Castelli